

Iowa Outdoors
Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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**LATE SEASON HUNT DELIVERS GEESE AND PLEASANT
MEMORIES**

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

For dyed-in-the-wool Iowa waterfowl hunters, few outdoor thrills compare to the beauty and excitement of a winter goose hunt. And as the latest blast of severe winter weather swept into the state last week, there remained little question that “late season” had officially arrived.

Although Canada geese can withstand just about anything the weatherman cares to dish out, the birds do have limits. Minus double digit temperatures, howling winds, and food covering layers of deep snow can cause even these feathered giants to call it quits.

That’s what appeared to be happening as I rendezvoused with Curt Stille, Rock Bridges, and Matt Washburn at Winnebago County’s Rice Lake. With the lake currently sealed in a foot of ice, most outdoor types were focused on ice fishing rather than waterfowl.

Only a couple of open air-holes remained on the lake, and any Canada geese still lingering in the area were gathered there. It was obvious that goose numbers were dropping. The flock, which had still numbered more than 7,000 birds just two days before, was now down to a thousand or less. Worse yet, another winter storm and even colder temps were predicted to move into the area later that evening. If any of us planned

on serving roast goose for Christmas dinner, it was clearly now or never. We decided to give goose hunting one last try.

Getting there was half the challenge. Upon selecting a field, our trucks plowed bumper deep snow as we blazed a trail to what we hoped would be a strategically located hilltop. Upon successfully arriving at our destination, we quickly placed more than 125 goose decoys atop six inches of fresh snow.

Late afternoon sunshine was quickly replaced by dark cloud cover as the predicted front made its arrival. The geese soon began stirring above the lake and eventually headed out to search for corn. Unfortunately, the first flocks missed us by more than a mile. At last, a group containing 50 or more honkers came closer, passing within several hundred yards of our spread. After continuing nearly a mile farther, the flock abruptly turned and flew back toward the lake. Upon passing us for the second time, a single goose finally succumbed to our calling. Setting its wings, the goose noisily descended. Apparently mesmerized by the sight and sound, no one moved as the huge bird prepared to land on our heads. Finally, the spell was broken.

"Matt, shoot that goose," urged Bridges as he took a breath from the goose call.

Matt fired and the honker tumbled into the decoys. We cheered the event, and all agreed that the sight of that single, perfectly decoyed goose had made the outing well worth the effort.

But the hunt wasn't over yet. Our discussion was cut short by the approach of more geese. This time there were several flocks in the air at once and it was tough to keep track on everything that was happening. The flocks converged and then milled around at the fringe of our decoys. A group of five decided that we were the real deal. Cupping their wings and dropping the black-webbed landing gear, the flock parachuted directly into the spread. We fired, dropping an additional four geese from the flock.

More geese were fast approaching from the lake, and we quickly resumed calling. Matt was finished, and we only needed three more geese to fill our combined, eight bird limit. The sky was now full of Canadas and the honking escalated to concert levels.

After carefully studying our layout with a suspicious eye, a flock of eight set their wings. No one moved as the giant fowl loomed closer. The honkers braked for a landing and noisily settled into the spread. At a distance of less than ten paces the birds boldly paraded through the decoys as if they intended to spend the winter.

Additional flocks --- some containing more than 50 birds --- quickly decided to join the party. It was an incredible sight. Pristine white backdrop, geese on the ground, more Canadas descending, and perhaps best of all ---- all that reverberating noise.

Someone said, "Let's take 'em," and we rose to fire. Considering the circumstances, collecting the final three birds was not a problem. Leaping to our feet, we exuberantly observed the outdoor tradition of victory arm pumps and celebratory High-Fives. Everyone agreed that it had been an incredible outing. Once the geese started flying, the hunt was over in a matter of minutes.

Later that night, the storm delivered an additional six inches of new snow. Returning to that same field would have been impossible. We couldn't complain though. As it turned out, the year's final goose hunt proved to be a memorable conclusion to the 2008 waterfowl season.

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FINAL EITHER-SEX DEER SEASON OF THE YEAR HAS BEGUN

The Late Muzzleloader season began on December 22, and represents the last deer season in the 2008-09 deer hunting cycle where any-sex licenses are available. The season closes on Jan. 10, 2009.

Hunters are faced with a number of challenges during this season with the foremost being that, coming on the heels of the shotgun seasons, there are substantially fewer deer in most areas and those remaining are more sensitive and alert to human disturbances. Also, the weather can be severe during some seasons, testing the dedication of hunters.

On the other hand, the Late Muzzleloader season offers the hunter some advantages. Severe weather, while testing hunter resolve, also tends to concentrate deer and makes them actively seek out quality food sources. Also, of all the Iowa deer seasons with unlimited any-sex licenses available, the Late Muzzleloader season has the fewest number of hunters afield, so there is more elbow room.

Temperatures well below normal and snow or snow and ice have characterized the weather over the last several days throughout Iowa. Temperatures are forecasted to become more seasonal in the upcoming days with more snow being predicted as well (and ice, depending on where you hunt). In southern Iowa a couple days of thawing temperatures would be beneficial to melt the ice and thick crust that has formed that inhibits the feeding of many birds and mammals up to and including deer.

Deer will concentrate on high quality feeding areas, like standing corn and soybeans, while the temperatures remain well below freezing. In the portions of the state that have powder snow, waste grain will be utilized as well but the ice has pretty much locked out the deer, as well as turkeys, pheasants, quail, squirrels, and other small mammals and songbirds, from any food source laying on the ground in southern Iowa.

Last year, about 36,700 any-sex and antlerless-only licenses were issued for this season. Hunters reported killing about 11,200 deer with antlered bucks and does making up 31 and 56 percent of the harvest respectively. The approximately 6,300 does reported in the Late Muzzleloader season represented more than 8 percent of Iowa's total doe harvest last year.

Hunters planning to use tree stands are reminded to practice good tree stand safety and to utilize a safety harness at all times. Remember that the colder temperatures and bulky clothing associated with late hunts decreases one's agility and further heightens the need for care. Hunters are required to wear blaze orange when participating in the Late Muzzleloader hunt and party hunting is not allowed. Hunters that hunted during the Early Muzzleloader season or one of the Shotgun Seasons with an any-deer license are still eligible to purchase an antlerless-only license(s) for the Late Muzzleloader season and hunt antlerless animals.

Deer populations are strong in central, northeast, and southern Iowa with densities still above objectives. Hunters can help farmers and landowners by taking an antlerless deer or two during the season. Hunters can also utilize the HUSH program to donate deer to the Iowa Food Bank and provide needed meat for Iowans.

A tagging requirement that is new for 2008 requires a hunter who kills an antlered buck to place the transportation tag on the animal's antler. It is recommended that the tag be placed on the antler beam either at the base or between two points. This new law was passed by the Legislature during their last session.

License holders for the Youth Deer Season with any-deer licenses who did not harvest a deer are eligible to use the license and unused tag during the Late Muzzleloader season. However, the youth hunter must follow the weapons restrictions that are in place during the season (a muzzleloading rifle or bow only for youths) and be under the direct supervision of an adult mentor.

Hunting hours are from one-half hour before sunrise to one-half hour after sunset. All deer taken must be reported using the harvest reporting system by midnight the day after the deer is recovered. This is the third year where hunters have reported their kill and it is a very important part of the deer management program in Iowa, playing a vital role in managing deer populations and hunting opportunities. Hunters can report their deer on the DNR website (www.iowadnr.com), by calling the toll free reporting number (1-800-771-4692), or also at a license vender. For hunters with Internet access, the online reporting of the harvest is a quick and easy way to register your deer.

For more information, contact Tom Litchfield, state deer biologist at (641) 774-2958

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[Please hold until Dec. 25]

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Bundled up volunteers who tracked birds in the annual Christmas Bird Count across Iowa faced subzero temperatures and ground blizzard conditions, this past weekend. 'Frozen tundra...blizzard conditions...rethinking our sanity' were some of the comments posted (www.iowabirds.org) on the Iowa Ornithologists Union website

Coordinated by Cornell University and National Audubon, the North American Bird Count is held each year. Local birders set up count areas and select a day—this year between December 14 and January 5—to tally the birds they come across in a 15 mile radius. Nearly 40 groups have or plan to run counts in their areas, according to the IOU.

For several groups, rain, sleet, wind and dropping temperatures were tough enough on the 14th. When compared to the major storm that howled through Iowa this past weekend, though, it seemed almost balmy. "It would have been very hard to bird (in that weather)," agrees Iowa City count coordinator Bob Dick. "A lot of the birds are under cover; they're not very visible."

During the Iowa City count, 39 people headed into the field. Another 12 monitored backyard feeders. By day's end, they tallied 61 different species of birds; down from the average of 66. "We did have one really remarkable spotting; six Tree Swallows on the Hawkeye Wildlife Area," offered compiler Chris Edwards. "I suspect

the strong south wind before the count pushed them back up here.” For only the third time in the 58 year history of the Iowa City area count, a Merlin was identified. And upland bird hunters could swap notes with birders. Pheasants are scarce for them, too. “We saw just four this year. We average about 50,” says Edwards, of the Iowa City count.

Across the state, Shenandoah volunteers—out in this past weekend’s blistering wind and cold—did tally 56 species on their near-numb fingers. Included were 31 Northern Bobwhite Quail. Coordinator Keith Dyche also reported 21 Eastern Bluebirds, a couple Trumpeter Swans, a Snow Bunting, Horned Larks and Tree Sparrows.

In Spirit Lake, 40 species were tallied in near blizzard conditions. Highlights included three Bald Eagles and a Hooded Merganser, 19 European Collared doves, a Merlin and two Coopers Hawks. With blizzard conditions, most spotting was from 34 feeder watchers, though coordinator Lee Schoenwe noted two parties did head into the frozen outdoors for an abbreviated count

At Lake Red Rock, surveyors listed 73 species on a day that began well and ended in a near blizzard; among them 13 species of waterfowl and 15 American White Pelicans. Also tallied, two rare Hermit Thrushes and several Yellow-rumped Warblers.

The counts—which stretch nationwide-- provide an index of species and numbers found from year to year. They might reflect an ‘invasion’ of northern species; indicative perhaps of a food shortage or extra harsh early winter in the birds’ home range. They can substantiate downturns or recovery of certain species. For instance, bald eagles have made a steady rise over the last three of four decades. A separate midwinter Bald Eagle survey, for instance, now tallies 3,000 to 4,000, depending on the weather. Just 20 years ago, the count would have been just 10 percent of that.

The annual count is also a social occasion. Besides sharing their common interest during the count, birders get together over lunch or that evening to socialize and—at least this year—to thaw out after a day in the field.

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[Photo accompanies this cut line]

ICE ANGLERS WELCOME COLD WEATHER

Arctic temperatures gripping Iowa for the past few weeks set a good layer of ice on Iowa lakes. Ice fishing allows the usually shore-bound angler access to the entire body of water, leveling the playing field with boat owners during the winter months. Iowa lakes are full of bluegills, crappies and other panfish that provide an entire season of fishing through the ice, usually within a 30 minute drive from home.

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CAUTION, AERATORS IN USE

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources has aeration systems in a number of lakes to prevent oxygen depletion during the winter. Aeration systems are marked with caution open water signs.

Ice conditions can vary greatly around the aeration holes. Wind can increase the size of the hole and erode the quality of the ice. Check the ice thickness often while in the area where an aerator is in use.

Anglers should note the aeration system at Five Island Lake in Palo Alto County has not been functioning correctly and has caused unsafe and erratic ice conditions on Town Bay, on the south end of the lake. The aeration system has been turned off so ice conditions can improve over the next couple of weeks and will not be turned back on this winter.

Open water is required to investigate and repair the cause of the problem. Large areas of deep water in Five Island Lake should help to prevent low oxygen levels that can lead to winter fish kills.

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